

Heroides 17

HELEN TO PARIS

The double *Heroides* are more complex than the single ones because they interlock, and the second in each pair responds to the first and adds to it – clarifying, correcting, providing a different perspective, bringing out new aspects etc. Within these doublets there are correspondences, to bring the two poems neatly together, and also differences, making for enlivening variety. By way of a change from 16 this epistle is much shorter; this time the writer is calm, sensible and realistic; she is trying to cool down rather than fire up the addressee; and she argues against going off together to Troy rather than for it. In common with 16 the irony continues (although it is much less extensive), and again there is a sad undercurrent (as Helen here takes the next step, facilitating the affair, which will be followed by elopement and war), and this is also a very amusing letter.

This poem increases the entertainment value of *Heroides* 16 by making it clear that Helen wasn't such a tough nut to crack after all and Paris didn't need to go on and on and try so hard with her: confirming the hints of her interest in him that she has already given (see 16.229f. and 249ff.), and taking them much further, she here reveals that she is already very attracted by his good looks, is in love with him and is willing to have a secret affair, and that she actually got Menelaus out of their way by urging him to go to Crete. There are comic rebounds too, as when Paris' mention of Oenone and his suggestion that Helen might be unfaithful to him at Troy backfire. Also diverting is her adroit fencing, as she responds tartly to his digs (e.g. about her being unsophisticated and coming from backward Greece) and questions and tops his boasts (for example, about his bravery and high birth). In addition, because this epistle is written at an early stage, before the love affair starts, and because she is trying to lessen Paris' ardour, we are given a quaint and piquant picture of Helen of Troy, one of the most notorious adulteresses in the world, as a virtuous wife, leading a perfectly respectable life, entirely free from scandal, erotically naive

and inexperienced in adultery, and criticizing others for deserting a partner and for being fickle, unfaithful and shameless.

However, she is in fact on the point of entering into a liaison. As you read the poem below, ask yourself what exactly she is trying to achieve in it, how she goes about securing her aims and why the letter is so long.

Now that your letter to me has defiled my eyes,
 I feel there's little glory to be won from not replying.
 You came here and dared to violate the sacred laws of hospitality
 and to incite a lawfully wedded wife to infidelity!
 Of course, the land of Sparta received you in its harbour 5
 after your voyage across the windy waves
 and our palace didn't keep its doors closed to you,
 even though you came from a different race,
 so you could wrong us to repay such great kindness!
 Were you a guest or an enemy, entering with such intentions? 10
 No doubt, even though this complaint of mine is so justified,
 you judge it to be unsophisticated and call it that.
 Let me be unsophisticated by all means, provided I don't forget about
 decency, and provided my way of life is free from scandal.
 Although I don't feign a severe expression on my face, 15
 and I don't sit here frowning harshly and stern,
 my respectability is well known, I've led a blameless life so far
 and nobody enjoys the prestige of having an affair with me.
 So I wonder all the more what gives you such confidence in your project
 and what's made you hope that you'd get into my bed. 20
 Because I was abducted once (since Theseus used force)
 do you think I deserve to be abducted a second time too?
 If I'd been seduced, I would have been in the wrong;
 since I was abducted, what could I do except say 'no'?
 He took me off for his pleasure, but didn't get what he wanted; 25
 I came back untouched, except by fear.
 I struggled, and that animal only snatched a few kisses
 from me; he got nothing more than that off me.
 You're so wicked you wouldn't have been content with that –
 heaven help me! He wasn't like you. 30
 He returned me still a virgin, his restraint reduced his culpability,
 and it's clear that the young man repented what he'd done.
 Did Theseus repent only for Paris to follow in his footsteps,
 so my name would always be on men's lips?
 But I'm not angry – who gets annoyed with a lover? – 35
 if only you're not pretending when you say you love me.
 For I doubt that too – not because I'm not fully aware
 of my beauty and don't have confidence in it,

but because credulity is usually ruinous for girls,
 and they say that men's words aren't to be trusted. 40
 You claim others misbehave and few married women are faithful.
 Who's to stop my name being among the few?
 My mother seemed to you a suitable precedent, and makes
 you think you could persuade me by citing her,
 but you're wrong about her infidelity: she was deceived, by a 45
 misleading appearance – her lover was disguised as a bird.
 I can't plead ignorance of anything, if I were to misbehave;
 there'll be no mistake on my part to mask the criminal act.
 She was mistaken, not immoral, and her lover's divinity made up for it.
 They won't call *me* fortunate for having Jupiter as my boyfriend. 50
 But you boast of your birth, your ancestors and their royal titles.
 My family is noble itself and illustrious enough.
 To say nothing of my father-in-law's descent from Jupiter and all the
 distinction of Tyndareus and Pelops (son of Tantalus),
 Jupiter is my father, thanks to Leda, who was taken in by his 55
 disguise as a swan and trustingly caressed the bird in her lap.
 Now go and tell all and sundry about the Trojan race's
 origins and Priam and his father Laomedon!
 I respect them; but your great glory Jupiter (you'll find)
 is five generations removed from you, one from me. 60
 Although I believe your land's dominion is mighty,
 I don't think that Sparta's is inferior to it.
 And even if this place is not as rich and has fewer
 men, yours is indisputably a barbarian land.
 It's true, your letter is rich in promises of gifts so splendid 65
 that goddesses themselves could be won over by them;
 but if I was now willing to overstep the bounds of decency,
 you yourself would be a better reason for committing adultery.
 Either I'll maintain my spotless reputation forever,
 or I'll go for you rather than your presents. 70
 I don't spurn them, but the most welcome gifts are always
 the ones made precious by the identity of the giver.
 It means much more that you love me, that you work hard
 to win me, that you sailed so far in hope of me.
 However much I try to conceal it, I also notice your 75
 shameless behaviour these days at dinner:
 now you gaze at me with bold, lecherous eyes,
 mounting an offensive which my eyes can scarcely stand,
 now you sigh, and now you pick up the goblet right
 after me and drink from the part where I drank. 80
 Ah, I've noticed over and over again covert signs being
 made by your fingers and your all but vocal eyebrows.

I've often feared that my husband would see them
 and blushed at the signals you didn't keep secret enough.
 I've often said in a low voice or under my breath: 85
 'He has no shame,' and I wasn't mistaken over that.
 I also read on the round table's surface under my name
 I LOVE (the letters were drawn out with spilled wine).
 But I told you I couldn't believe that by rolling my eyes –
 oh dear, I've already learned you can speak like this! 90
 If I'd been inclined to misbehave, I would have been moved by
 such endearments, my heart could have been won by them.
 Also you're extraordinarily handsome, I confess, and a
 girl might want to go to bed with you.
 Rather than abandoning decency as an adulteress, I'd even 95
 prefer some unmarried woman to be happy with you.
 Just learn from examples that one can do without a pretty partner;
 to abstain from blessings and delights is a virtue.
 How many young men, do you think, want what you want,
 but are sensible? Or is Paris the only one with eyes? 100
 You're not more perceptive than them, you're more bold and rash;
 you're not brighter, but you are too assured.
 I wish you'd sailed here on your swift ship when
 I was a virgin courted by a thousand suitors.
 If I'd seen you, I'd have ranked you first out of the thousand. 105
 My husband himself will pardon this judgment of mine.
 You're slow, too late. The pleasures you hope for have already been
 taken over and appropriated. Another man has what you're after.
 But, while I might want to become your wife in Troy,
 at the same time Menelaus doesn't have me against my will. 110
 Please stop tearing at my tender heart with your words;
 don't hurt me – you do say you love me.
 Let me keep the lot that fortune has assigned to me;
 don't be keen to shame me by plundering my honour.
 But you say Venus agreed to that, and in lofty Ida's 115
 valleys three goddesses showed themselves to you naked,
 and when one granted dominion and the other military prowess,
 the third one said: 'You'll be Helen's husband.'
 I for my part can scarcely believe that heavenly beings
 submitted their beauty to your judgment. 120
 Even if that is true, certainly the other part is made up –
 when you say I was given as a reward for your decision.
 I don't have such confidence in my body as to think that
 on the authority of a goddess I was the finest gift.
 I'm content for my beauty to be commended in the eyes of men;
 praise by Venus exposes me to divine envy. 125

No, actually I *don't* dispute such praise by her, I even incline to it:
 why deny the compliment I desire in my heart of hearts?
 Don't be angry because I've been very reluctant to believe you:
 people usually take time to credit something as momentous as this. 130
 So I'm delighted firstly that Venus found me so attractive
 and secondly that I seemed the greatest prize to you,
 and after you'd only heard of Helen's charms you didn't
 prefer the honours offered by Pallas and Juno.
 In your eyes, then, I am valour, I am glorious dominion! 135
 I'd be as hard as iron if I didn't love a heart like yours.
 Believe me, I'm not as hard as iron; but I resist loving
 someone who I think can hardly become my man.
 Why try to furrow the watery shore with a curved plough
 in hope of a crop ruled out by the very nature of the place? 140
 I haven't had a furtive affair; I've never deftly deceived
 my faithful husband (the gods are my witnesses);
 and now, as I entrust my words to a secret letter,
 this is for me a new function for writing.
 I envy those with experience. I'm ignorant of the world 145
 and suspect that adultery's path is difficult.
 My very fear is causing me problems; I'm already in a
 turmoil, and think that all eyes are on my face –
 with good reason: I've heard hostile muttering by the people,
 and Aethra has reported certain comments to me. 150
 Conceal your love, unless you prefer to terminate it.
 But why terminate it? You're capable of concealing it.
 On with the game, but discreetly! We have greater but not
 total freedom as a result of Menelaus' absence.
 Certainly he's set out for a distant place, obliged to go by business; 155
 he had sound, solid grounds for suddenly sailing off –
 or so it seemed to me. When he was wavering over leaving,
 I said: 'Go, but come back as soon as you can.'
 He was delighted at the omen. He kissed me and said:
 "Take care of the house, my affairs and our Trojan guest." 160
 I only just held back a laugh. While I struggled to suppress it,
 all I could say to him was: 'I will.'
 He has sailed off to Crete with favourable winds,
 but don't think that means you can do anything you want.
 My man is absent, but mounts guard over me in his absence – 165
 or don't you know that kings have a long reach?
 My beauty is a problem too: the more you men persist
 in praising me, the more grounds he has for fear.
 I enjoy my reputation for loveliness, but it's a nuisance just now;
 it would have been better if I didn't deserve my fame. 170

And don't be surprised that he's gone off and left you here with me:
 he had trust in my character and way of life.
 My looks cause fear, my way of life arouses confidence; he is
 reassured by my virtue, made afraid by my beauty.
 You say we mustn't waste this freely offered opportunity and 175
 must make use of my simple-minded husband's complaisance.
 That both appeals and appals; I haven't made my mind up
 properly yet; I'm wavering, I'm doubtful.
 My husband is away, and you are sleeping on your own;
 you're taken by my beauty, as I am in turn by yours; 180
 and the nights are long, and we already make love by letter;
 and you're charming (oh dear me, yes!), and we're under the same roof.
 God strike me dead if all that doesn't encourage adultery;
 however, there's some fear that holds me back.
 I wish you could compel me to do what you can't persuade me to do! 185
 My lack of sophistication should have been disposed of by force.
 Sometimes wrong is profitable for the very people who are wronged.
 At all events I could have been compelled to be happy in that way.
 Let's rather fight against the love we're starting to feel, while it's still new!
 It doesn't take much water to quench a fire that's just been lit. 190
 The love of strangers is unreliable; it strays, like them,
 and, when you hope it's completely dependable, it's gone.
 Hypsipyle is witness to that, and so is Ariadne, both
 cheated when marriage to the man didn't materialize.
 You are unfaithful too. They say you deserted your 195
 Oenone after loving her for many years.
 You don't deny it yourself. In case you don't know it,
 I've investigated very carefully everything to do with you.
 Also, even if you wanted to be a loyal and steadfast lover,
 you can't: your Trojans are already unfurling their sails; 200
 while you talk to me, making preparations for the night of love you
 hope for, you'll already have a wind to take you home.
 Half-way through the voyage you'll relinquish your brand-new delight
 in me; your love will be gone, off with the winds.
 Should I go with you, as you urge, see your celebrated Troy 205
 and marry you, the grandson of great Laomedon?
 Rumour spreads the word quickly, and I'm not so disdainful
 of it as to let it tell the whole world of my disgrace.
 Whatever will Sparta and all Greece, whatever will the
 peoples of Asia and your Troy find to say about me? 210
 Whatever will Priam and his wife, whatever will all your
 brothers and your Trojan sisters-in-law think of me?
 How will you be able to hope I'll be faithful, how won't
 you be troubled by the example you yourself have set?

Whenever a stranger enters the harbour at Ilium,
 he'll make you feel anxious and afraid. 215
 How often will you say to me yourself angrily 'adulteress',
 forgetting that you're reproaching yourself as well as me!
 You'll criticize the offence but also be the person who inspired it.
 May the earth cover my face in my grave before that happens! 220
 But, you say, I'll enjoy Troy's wealth and sumptuous luxury,
 and I'll get even more presents than those you promise;
 I'll definitely be given expensive purple fabrics
 and I'll be rich, with a great heap of gold.
 Forgive me for saying it: your gifts aren't worth that much;
 somehow this Sparta of mine keeps me from leaving. 225
 If I go to Troy and I'm maltreated, who will help me?
 I won't find my brothers there or my father to aid me.
 Lying Jason promised Medea everything,
 but drove her from his home none the less. 230
 She didn't have her parents Aetes and Idyia or her sister
 Chalciope to go back to when she was spurned.
 I don't fear anything like that, but Medea didn't either.
 Anticipation often misleads us into high hopes.
 You'll find that for every ship now tossed on the ocean 235
 the sea was calm as it left its harbour.
 I'm also terrified by the bloody torch which your mother
 dreamed she bore before the day of your birth;
 and I'm afraid of the warnings of the prophets who (they say)
 predicted that Ilium would burn with Greek fire. 240
 Although Venus is friendly to you because she was victorious
 and beat the other two thanks to your decision,
 I fear the pair of goddesses who, if your bragging is
 true, didn't win as a result of your verdict.
 I have no doubt an expedition will be mounted if I go with you. 245
 Ah, our love will pick its way through the midst of swords.
 Do you think that the Thessalians declared savage war on the
 Centaurs for the seizure of Hippodamia of Atrax,
 but Menelaus, my two brothers and Tyndareus will be slow
 to take action if we give them such good grounds for anger? 250
 Despite your brave boasts and talk of courageous exploits
 your beauty is at variance with your claims.
 Paris, your body is better suited to loving than fighting.
 Leave war to strong men; you be a lover, always!
 Tell your acclaimed Hector to campaign instead of you; 255
 bed, not the battlefield, is the place for your services.
 I'd avail myself of them, if I had any sense and was a
 little bolder; any sensible girl will avail herself of them –

or perhaps I will be sensible, abandon decency
 and finally surrender, conquered at last. 260
 You want us to discuss your proposition in secret, face to face:
 I know what you're after, what you're calling a 'discussion'.
 But you're moving too fast; your crop hasn't ripened yet.
 Delaying might help you get what you want.
 Enough. I've confided my secret feelings to this letter, and my fingers 265
 are tired from this furtive writing, so let me end now.
 Let's continue our conversation through my allies Aethra
 and Clymene, my two attendants and advisers.

Helen is not only more shrewd than Paris but also makes a much better job of achieving her aims in her letter, using some excellent psychology. She begins by pretending to be outraged by his proposals and depicting herself as a respectable married woman and faithful wife, to get him worried and wrong-footed from the start, so that he will value her and be grateful for what she is prepared to do with him. She does want to enter into a relationship with him, but there is a danger of detection, so it must be a secret affair and he must be discreet. She tries to damp down the ardour evident in his epistle, so he won't do anything impetuous and open, and give the game away. Hence her various references to the risks and Menelaus' long reach and her criticism of Paris for being too obvious at dinner. Hence too her unaccommodating responses to his approach – countering his claims, showing she has not been taken in by his ploys and assurances, coming out with objections and expressing doubts (about his love and fidelity and the Judgment and Venus' use of her as a bribe etc.). She is trying to calm him down; but she doesn't want to put him off totally. So among the many negative comments she also works in encouragement for him (at 35, 67ff., 91ff., 103ff., 132ff., 153f., 157f., 177ff., 198, 246, 253f., 257ff.). All of that and various abrupt changes of mood and direction take him on something of a rollercoaster ride, to keep him off-balance.

She is willing for an affair, on her terms, but she definitely does not want to go away with Paris. She speaks out strongly against elopement at 205ff., producing various arguments and showing it as something that frightens her (the woman he loves) and will be bad for her and him and his city. So that this refusal will not turn him off completely, she has saved it until late on, after lots of cheering hints for him, and she follows it up immediately with a very positive passage (257ff.) which intimates at length and at the very end (for impact on Paris) that she will enter into a liaison with him. This leaves the ball in his court. Presumably she is now waiting for him to convince her through her maids that in response to this epistle he will content himself with just a love affair and will be circumspect.

Paris ran on and on in his passionate letter, so quite a long reply would seem necessary to lessen his fervour. It also seems reasonable to deduce another reason for the length of *Heroides* 17: Helen is attracted physically to Paris and is in love with him, so she may well be trying to exert some control over her own feelings here, reminding herself repeatedly of the risks and the need to be secretive and